# John Smith circa 1873

From the Wells Smith Album

## Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt

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This photograph shows my great-great-grandfather, John Smith, holding one of his young children, likely his first son, Lewis Nolan Smith, who was born in June 1871.

Smith was born in Missouri in 1831. He married Esther Wells around 1870, and by the early 1870s they were beginning their family in Douglas County, Oregon.

He had come west with his parents and extended family by way of the Elliott Cutoff in 1853, sometimes referred to as the Lost Wagon Train of 1853. He would have been about 22 years old at the time. The journey through the Cascades was brutal. There was no real trail through the mountains on that cutoff, and members of the wagon train were eventually rescued in scattered groups as they emerged from the rugged forest on foot, many of them barefoot, having left all their possessions behind.

Twenty years later, this photograph shows him not as a young emigrant, but as a husband, father, and farmer in Douglas County, Oregon, near Yoncalla and Rice Hill. He looks wild, weathered, and direct here — perhaps partly because of the long exposure and the demands of early photography, but perhaps also because life was rugged in early Oregon.

There is something striking about his stare. It is easy to read too much into an old photograph, but knowing even a little of what he had lived through makes this image feel less like a formal portrait and more like a survival document. This is not just a man posing with a child. This is a man who crossed the continent, survived the Cascades, settled in Oregon, and began again.

The photograph is about 153 years old.